

## **The Play of Language in Ancient Greek Comedy**

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## Volume 154

# **The Play of Language in Ancient Greek Comedy**



Comic Discourse and Linguistic Artifices of Humour,  
from Aristophanes to Menander

Edited by

Kostas E. Apostolakis and Ioannis M. Konstantakos

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# Preface

A French theoretician once remarked that anthropologists can be recognised from the food stains on their clothes, given that they are inveterate frequenters of restaurants, taverns, or lunch pubs. This is probably true of all scholars of the humanities. The origins of this volume go back exactly to such an encounter of scholars over the loaded table – one evening in December 2018, when the two of us were having dinner in a neighbourhood bistrot, at the north of Athens, and discussing the organisation of an international conference at the University of Crete. As we both maintain a lively interest in Greek comedy, we came up with the idea of comic language and the linguistic techniques of humour as a conference topic. This promised to be an opulent and not overploughed field that would lend itself to fruitful scholarly exploitation. Soon we were exchanging emails and drawing up lists of the speakers we would like to have in the conference. The colleagues we approached responded readily and eagerly, and we felt a little like the mythical Jason or the legendary Germanic king Hengist putting together their brave crews for a fabulous enterprise.

The practical procedures for the preparation of the conference were also set in motion, mostly thanks to the initiatives of Kostas E. Apostolakis and the supportive milieu of the University of Crete. The Department of Philology willingly undertook to host the conference in its hospitable premises at the university campus at Rethymno, which replicate the beautiful labyrinthine style of Evans' Knossos. The Special Account for Research Funds of the University of Crete offered a generous grant to cover the organising expenses and the accommodation of the speakers. Almost everything was ready, and the conference was scheduled to take place in May 2020. Then, in the early March of that fateful year, the COVID pandemic reached Greece, and the lockdowns became our everyday reality.

At the beginning, we tried to be optimistic, in spite of the growing fear, not unlike the heroes of Camus' *The Plague*. We kept postponing the conference again and again, for a few months each time, in the hope that conditions were eventually bound to ameliorate, and that human contact would become permissible before long. We could have opted, of course, for an event online, the kind of experience that developed into a standard part of university life from a given point onwards. However, as both of us were facing on a daily basis the very unsatisfactory practice of online teaching, we were reluctant to extend this kind of virtual semi-existence to the endeavour which we had originally planned as a live exchange of knowledge and scholarly companionship. In the end, exasperated after a protracted period of continuous cancellations and deferments, we

decided to abandon the plan of the conference and to collect the written chapters from the participants, so as to prepare a collective volume.

We are most grateful to the authors who have contributed to the book. They have laboured for our common project with unfailing endurance and patience in difficult times, and have stayed with us throughout the long interval of its gestation and its metamorphoses. We feel deeply honoured that they have entrusted us with the fruits of their work. We are sorry that we have not been able to welcome them to Crete, but we hope for another opportunity in the future, when — as is usual in the wonderful world of Aristophanic comedy — language will be transformed into real things and acts.

Professor Antonios Rengakos is our *agathos daimon*. Already while we were planning the conference, he took an active interest, encouraged us, and invited us to think of the renowned *Trends in Classics Supplementary Volumes* series as a possible venue of publication of the proceedings. When we approached him later with a proposal of the volume, he warmly embraced the project and offered us his invaluable support. By now, no less than four generations of Modern Greek scholars have found a good home and a well-respected forum in the rich and prestigious *Trends* series, which is his spiritual child. We are all proud to be soldiers in his great scholarly legion — the equivalent of the magical “Dumbledore’s army” in the Greek philological world.

A big “thank you” is due to our colleague Melina Tamiolaki, of the University of Crete, who offered us valuable advice and guided us through the tricky process of applying to the university administration for funding. We owe a great debt to two charismatic young doctoral students of the Department of Philology at Crete, members of Kostas E. Apostolakis’ dynamic research team: Georgia Choustoulaki (who meanwhile has been awarded her doctorate) and Georgios Triantafyllou, who has also contributed a chapter to the collection. They provided vital assistance in editing the volume, formatting the texts and bibliographies, checking references, and taking care of innumerable practical details. Last but not least, our wives, Vaso and Konstantina, tolerated the project with their undaunted good humour and surrounded us with their inexhaustible love and solicitude. Let our profound gratitude to them serve as an envoi for this book.

Kostas E. Apostolakis  
Ioannis M. Konstantakos

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Piero Totaro

## Three Words in Aristophanes' *Wealth* (999, 1037, 1083)

**Abstract:** This chapter provides a detailed study of three problematic words from the text of Aristophanes' *Wealth*, all of them taken from the episode of the lustful old woman and her former young lover. In v. 999, the milk-based cake ἄμης, sent by the young man to the old lady, implies that this kind of smooth pastry is particularly appropriate for a toothless old woman. In v. 1037, the reading τηλία (nominative), given in the majority of codices, is favoured. The speaker sarcastically compares the old woman to a *tēlia* (a large round tray with a raised circular edge), to mock her fat girth. In v. 1083, the manuscripts' reading ἐτῶν may represent the genitive plural not only of ἔτος, "year", but also of ἔτης, "fellow citizen". Apart from being mocked for her age, the old woman is also denounced as a veteran whore who has been possessed by innumerable lovers.

In one of the scenes that, in the second part of *Wealth*,<sup>1</sup> unveil the consequences of the healing of the blind god of richness, Aristophanes brings on stage an Old Woman and a Young Man, together with the Coryphaeus (from the Chorus of old farmers) and the protagonist Chremylus (959–1096). The Old Woman, wearing a white mask covered with rouge (1064) and a dress adorned with ποικίλα (1099),<sup>2</sup> poses as a young lady, suitably adapting perhaps her attitude and voice (cf. 963). Initially, in dialogue with Chremylus, she recalls the attention paid her by her young lover, on whom she bestowed substantial material benefits, until the opportunist gigolo lost interest and decided to break up with her.

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<sup>1</sup> Warmest thanks are due to S. Douglas Olson and Pietro Berardi for their precious suggestions. Unless otherwise specified, the text of Aristophanes is cited from Wilson 2007a, whereas the scholia on *Wealth* reflect the editorial assessments of Massa Positano 1960 (*Tzetziana*); Chantry 1994b (*vetera*); Chantry 1996 (*recentiora*).

<sup>2</sup> Aristophanes' ἔχουσα δ' ἡλθεσ αὐτῇ ποικίλα has been variously translated: "robe brodée" (Van Daele in Coulon 1930, 147; Thiery 1997, 975), "veste ricamata" (Paduano 1988, 175), "Your dress looks bright enough" (Halliwell 1998, 253), "richly dressed" (Sommerstein 2001, 133), "vesti ricamate" (Torchio 2001, 241), "wearing your own finery" (Henderson 2002, 595), "veste tutta ricami" (Albini/Barberis 2003, 83).

## 1 *Plut.* 999: ἄμης

Both literature and iconography offer substantial evidence that the exchange of gifts between lovers — e.g. animals (such as birds, horses, and hounds)<sup>3</sup> or deserts<sup>4</sup> — was a common and meaningful practice. But in the context of a hopelessly deteriorated and compromised relationship like the one depicted in *Wealth*, such an exchange takes on a negative value and turns out to be remarkably disrespectful towards the ex-lover (993–1002):

OLD WOMAN: But nowadays that skunk hasn't got the same attitude; he's completely changed his tune. You see, when I sent him this πλακοῦς and the other snacks (τραγήματα) on the tray (πίναξ) here, with a message that I'd visit him this evening —

CHREMYLUS: What did he do, I'd like to know?

OLD WOMAN: He sent it all back, along with this ἄμης, on condition that I never visit him again, and on top of that he added, "Once upon a time Milesians were formidable".<sup>5</sup>

With the proverbial expression "Once upon a time Milesians were formidable", the Young Man irreverently either implies that his love story with the Old Woman is over<sup>6</sup> or intends to remind her of her inexorable physical decay.<sup>7</sup> The significance of the exchange of sweets between lovers is less obvious, and I find it surprising that modern commentaries (including Holzinger's, which is generally extremely detailed) fail to thoroughly investigate the meaning of this action, which has however been carefully considered by Vinicio Tammaro in his "Note al *Pluto*" (1983, 134–136). Tammaro came to the conclusion that the sweets mentioned in Aristophanes are strongly sexualised, and that they reproduce the shapes of genitals:

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Ar. Av.* 706–707; *Plut.* 157; on the topic, see Koch-Harnack 1983.

<sup>4</sup> Athenaeus (14.643f) and Aelian (*VH* 11.12) report a famous anecdote regarding a dessert that Alcibiades sent to Socrates "to ignite his passion", unleashing Xanthippe's wrath. This led her to violently smash the cake, after which the philosopher replied "So, therefore, you cannot eat it either".

<sup>5</sup> Transl. Henderson 2002, 565 (slightly adapted).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Holzinger 1940, 300.

<sup>7</sup> Tammaro 1983, 136–137; Torchio 2001, 203; Sommerstein 2001, 201. The physical decline of the Old Woman is compared to the decadence of Miletus, which followed a period of power and prosperity for the city, and subsequently turned into a proverbial formula (first attested at Anac. *PMG* 426 = fr. 53 Gentili and Timocr. *PMG* 733; on the origin of the proverb, see now Bernsdorff 2020, II 738–739). The parabasis ode of *Wasps* opens (1060–1062) with a reworking of this proverb, with the Chorus of old jurymen-wasps complaining that "once upon a time we were valiant in Choruses, and valiant in battle, and above all most valiant with this" (referring to their sting).

si può supporre che, fallica o testicolare, sia comunque “virile” — di contro a un “femmineo” πλακοῦς — la parvenza dell'ἄμης nel *Pluto* (ciò pare denunciare del resto l'ironica condizione espressa al v. 1000). Un frammento di Alessi (163 K., dall' Ὀμοίῳ) costituisce forse una decisiva conferma, se mostra — al di là di residui dubbi testuali — che gli ἄμητες, accanto ai λαγῶα e alle κίχλαι (tutti τραγήματα), erano dagli sposi offerti alle spose. La connotazione nuziale suonerebbe in definitiva come un'ulteriore beffa (p. 136).<sup>8</sup>

Paduano, by contrast, was unpersuaded by the assimilation of πλακοῦς and ἄμης to the shape of female and male genitals (1988, 154–155 n. 137):

Che il giovane risponda, oltre che con la sgarbata restituzione, con un altro dono dello stesso tipo, si spiega non già con una lambiccata proposta di vedere nei dolci stessi una raffigurazione rispettiva degli organi genitali (Tammaro) — ma come una sfrontata volontà di mettere sullo stesso piano il significato del dono della donna (che è quello di richiesta amorosa), con una opposta e simmetrica richiesta dell'uomo: che è evidentemente quella di essere lasciato in pace.

Even Sommerstein (2001, 201 *ad Ar. Plut.* 999), although he fails to cite Tammaro's article, is inclined to read Aristophanes' ἄμης through the lens of the aforementioned fragment of Alexis:

(*scil.* ἄμης) which was traditionally brought, together with other foods, by a bridegroom to his bride when he came to fetch her from her father's house to his (Alexis fr. 168). If on that occasion it conveyed the message “I want you to come to my house, and I will maintain you”, it is here used (together with the return of the other gifts) to say almost exactly the opposite: “I don't need you to maintain me, and I don't want you to come to my house”.

I believe that both Tammaro's and Sommerstein's interpretations of Alexis fr. 168 are affected by a clear misunderstanding.

The fragment (*ap.* Ath. 14.642d) comes from a dialogue in which one of the interlocutors (probably a greedy parasite or a servant) initially states that he is not a φιλόδειπνος, later nullifying this declaration by specifying that his culinary

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<sup>8</sup> Tammaro (1983, 136 n. 12) notes that Henderson, in the *Maculate Muse* (see now the second edition, Henderson 1991), thought that Alexis' ἄμης was “one of the various kinds of pastries used to refer to the cunt” (Henderson 1991, 144), and that πλακοῦς χάριστος in Ar. fr. 211 “probably means phallus”, or alternatively “indicates the cunt, as at *Plut.* 995–998” (Henderson 1991, 160 n. 41). Torchio (2001, 222–223 *ad Ar. Plut.* 999) synthetically reiterates Tammaro's observations: “Per Henderson ... anche la forma di questo dolce alluderebbe ai genitali femminili. Alexis, fr. 168, 5 K.-A., fa riferimento all'uso degli sposi di donare ἄμητες alle spose il giorno delle nozze insieme ad altre 'leccornie' ('lepri e tordi'): la simbologia nuziale associata a questo tipo di dolce renderebbe ancor più 'crucele' la risposta del giovane”.

preferences incline toward τραγήματα, and eventually revealing, with a juicy comic *aprosdoketon*, that his palate is actually delighted by all kinds of dishes:

οὐδὲ φιλόδειπνός εἰμι μὰ τὸν Ἀσκληπιόν,  
 τραγήμασιν χαίρω δὲ μᾶλλον. (B.) εὖ πάνυ.  
 (A.) τραγήματ' αἰσθάνομαι γὰρ ὅτι νομίζετε  
 τοῖς νυμφίοις μετιοῦσι τὴν νύμφην ἴλεγεις†  
 παρέχειν, ἄμητας καὶ λαγῶα καὶ κίχλας. 5  
 τούτοισι χαίρω, τοῖς δὲ κεκαρυκευμένοις  
 ὄψοισι καὶ ζωμοῖσιν ἤδομ', ὧ θεοί

With regard to the irresistible τραγήματα, his mind immediately runs to those traditionally served during wedding ceremonies at the bride's parents' house, when the bridegroom came to pick her up to escort her in procession to her new home. On that occasion — as stated in the fragment — ἄμητες, pieces of hare, and thrushes were usually offered (as τραγήματα) τοῖς νυμφίοις μετιοῦσι τὴν νύμφην, “to the bridegroom and his groomsmen fetching the bride”.<sup>9</sup> The fragment thus documents that ἄμητες were included among the kinds of treats offered to the husband at the bride's house, and not by the bridegroom to the bride, as Tammaro and Sommerstein argue in support of their interpretation of the Aristophanic passage.

The question to be addressed now is what a πλακοῦς and an ἄμης were. The former (literally “flat cake”; cf. LSJ 1411, s.v. I) could properly indicate any pastry product other than bread (ἄρτος);<sup>10</sup> the latter was a particular kind of πλακοῦς, the dough for which contained milk.<sup>11</sup> I suggest that this difference, slight as it may appear, explains both the destination and the meaning of the gift: the Old Woman sends snacks she imagines will be particularly appreciated by the Young Man, a collection of τραγήματα and a πλακοῦς, but the Young Man refuses those gifts, returning all of them to sender with the addition of a different kind of sweet, a soft milk-based pastry, which — he guesses — may be particularly suitable for

<sup>9</sup> The text and interpretation of the fragment are excellently discussed by Arnott 1996, 493–496; see also Sanchis Llopis/Montañés Gómez/Pérez Asensio 2007, 177; Stama 2016, 321–323.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. L. Citelli in Canfora 2001, III 1665 n. 3 (*ad Ath.* 14.643e); Pellegrino 2013, 42.

<sup>11</sup> *Ath.* 14.644f, ἄμης: πλακοῦντος γένος; *Poll.* 6.77, πλακοῦντων εἶδη ἄμης, ἀμητίσκος; *Phot.* α 1195 *Theodoridis*, ἄμης: γένος πλακοῦντος (further lexicographical and etymological references are collected by *Theodoridis* 1982, 125 *ad loc.*). Apart from *Ar. Plut.* 999 and *Alexis fr.* 168.5, see also *Amphis fr.* 9.3; *Anaxandrides fr.* 42.56; *Antiphanes fr.* 89.2, 297; *Epicrates fr.* 5.5; *Ephippus fr.* 8.3 (cf. *Olson* 2007, 303 *ad loc.*); *Telecleides fr.* 1.12; *Men. fr.* 381; *Schol. vet. Ar. Plut.* 999a, εἶδος πλακοῦντος γαλακτώδους; *Schol. Tz. Ar. Plut.* 995, ἄμητες δὲ γαλακτοπηγῆ κατασκευάσματα, τὰ μὲν συναφεψηθέντα μέλιτι, τὰ δ' οὐ.

a toothless old woman.<sup>12</sup> It cannot be accidental that, in the abundant repertory of insults employed by the Young Man to slander the Old Woman (a virtual catalogue of the *vetula-Skoptik* motif, as Grassmann calls it),<sup>13</sup> her lack of teeth have a prominent place, along with her grey hair (1042–1043), a face abundantly furrowed by wrinkles (1050–1051), her dirtiness (1062), and the exaggerated antiquity of a woman “fucked by thirteen thousand years” (1082–1083). See *Plut.* 1055–1059:

YOUNG MAN: Would you like to play with me? It's been a while.

OLD WOMAN: Where, my dear?

YOUNG MAN: Right here. Have these nuts.

OLD WOMAN: What kind of play do you mean?

YOUNG MAN: Guessing how many teeth you have.

CHREMYLUS: Here, let me guess: I say three or four.

YOUNG MAN: Pay up: she's only got a single molar.<sup>14</sup>

**12** Commenting on a different type of food, namely, the *χόνδρος* (Ar. *Vesp.* 737–738), MacDowell (1971, 234) aptly observes: “The implication is that an old man is toothless (cf. 165) and can take only soft or liquid food”. See also Biles/Olson 2015, 317: “[*χόνδρος*] in any case represents something a toothless old man can easily eat”.

**13** Grassmann 1966, 176 s.v. “*vetula-Skoptik*”.

**14** Transl. Henderson 2002, 573–575 (slightly modified). An insult against a toothless old he-taera closes Philetaerus fr. 9: “And my lips are sealed about Nais; because she's lost her molars” (*ap. Ath.* 13.587e; transl. Olson 2010, 395). A scommatic continuity is easy to trace in Greek and Latin epigrammatic tradition: cf. Lucill. *Anth. Pal.* 11.310, “You bought hair, rouge, honey, wax, and teeth; for the same outlay you might have bought a face” (transl. Paton 1918, 213); Mart. 3.93.1–2, *cum tibi trecenti consules, Vetustilla, / et tres capilli quattuorque sint dentes*; see also Hor. *Carm.* 4.13.9–12, *importunus enim transvolat aridas / quercus et refugit te, quia luridi / dentes, te, quia rugae / turpant et capitis nives*; and *Epod.* 8.1–6, *rogare longo putidam te saeculo / viris quid enervet meas, / cum sit tibi dens ater et rugis vetus / frontem senectus exaret / hietque turpis inter aridas natis / podex velut crudae bovis*; *Carmina Priapea* 12.8–9, *hesterna quoque luce dum precatur, / dentem de tribus excreavit unum* (on Horace and *Priapea*, see Richlin 1983, 109–116; Watson 2003, 295; Fedeli/Ciccarelli 2008, 535 ff.). In his catalogue of masks, Pollux (4.151) includes the “old maid” (οἰκουρὸν γράδιον), who “has a snub nose and two teeth for each jaw”; cf. the corresponding old-woman masks listed in Bernabò Brea 1981, 212–213 and Bernabò Brea 2001, 238–239. We currently lack a comprehensive, detailed study of the profile of the old woman in Attic Comedy: Oeri's (1948) dissertation is outdated; despite the interesting sociological analysis he offers, Henderson 1987 is far from exhaustive; brief but useful observations are provided by Tammaro 1995, 174. An excellent, up-to-date survey on the *vetula-Skoptik* motif in ancient Greek and Latin literature is offered by Watson 2003, 287 ff., and abundant bibliography on the topic can be found in Galán Vioque 2002, 430.

## 2 *Plut.* 1037: τηλία

The embarrassment of modern scholars in attempting to discover the meaning of *Plut.* 1037 (εἰ τυγχάνοι γ' ὁ δακτύλιος ὧν τηλίας) is only partially relieved by the fact that the line appeared no less obscure to ancient commentators, who did not hesitate to admit their difficulties in interpreting it (especially with regard to the exegesis of τηλία, as testified, e.g., by Schol. vet. 1037b, which candidly admits τηλία: τοῦτο τί ἐστὶν οὐκ οἶδα). In a well-documented article, Marcel Chantry (1994a) gathered the whole corpus of literary, lexicographical, and scholiastic witnesses related to the term, in order to outline its precise semantic spectrum and the functions of the object it indicates. It can be concluded that a τηλία was a polished table with a raised circular edge, usually employed for flour-processing and on which bread, in addition to being prepared, was put to rise and sold (cf. e.g. Schol. vet. *Ar. Plut.* 1037a, d, e); the presence of a large raised edge made it possible to avoid scattering the flour and kept the products on top of the table, while also allowing the implement to be employed as a table for playing dice or a spot for fights between cocks or quails (cf. Aeschin. 1.53; Alciphron 3.17; Synesius, *Epistulae* 45 Garzya; Poll. 7.203, 9.108, 10.150; Schol. vet. *Ar. Plut.* 1037g; *Anecd. Bach.* I 386, 30; *Anecd. Bekk.* 307, 31). Schol. vet. *Ar. Plut.* 1037l provides an additional meaning (“chimney lid”), but this explanation is probably influenced by the way the object is employed at *Wasps* 147, where (as Schol. 147b Koster clarifies) a τηλία functions as a cover for a chimney, despite the fact that it was properly “a smooth board on which flour was sold at the market”.<sup>15</sup> According to a number of lexica and ancient etymological works, τηλία (or σηλία) was substantially equivalent to terms like κόσκινον, “sifter”, and ἀλευρόττησις, the tool through which flour was filtered (διαττώσιν; cf. Phot. α 931 Theodoridis; *Synag.* B α 964 Cunningham) or sieved (σήθουσιν, διασήθουσιν; Hsch. α 2904 Cunningham; *Etym. Magn.* 60.25 Gaisford). On an interpretation alternatively ascribed to the grammarians Orion (*Etym. Gen.* AB s.v. τηλία) and Oros (*Etym. Magn.* 757.1–2 Gaisford; [Zonar.] p. 1727 Tittmann), τηλία indicates the “circumference of the sifter”, ἡ περιφέρεια τοῦ κοσκίνου (thus both Hsch. τ 772 Hansen and *Suda* τ 497 Adler): this interpretation is registered in the ancient scholia to *Plut.* 1037, variously phrased as ὁ κοσκίνου κύκλος or τοῦ κοσκίνου ὁ κύκλος (Schol. vet. 1037m, reported in many manuscripts but absent from **R**; see also Tzetzes’ related

<sup>15</sup> At *Vesp.* 148, a piece of ξύλον is exactly what Bdelycleon uses to cover the fireplace Philocleon tries to get out of, in the attempt to nullify his father’s efforts to escape his house and satisfy his uncontrollable desire to be a juror in the courts.

scholion [p. 211 Massa Positano]), κοσκινόγυρος or κοσκίνου γύρος (Schol. rec. 1037b).<sup>16</sup>

In the light of such complex and multifarious lexical and exegetical positions, how should we interpret the humorous reference to τηλία in *Plut.* 1037? Being abandoned by her young lover made the Old Woman endure harsh psychological-physical damage: “I’m pining away with grief”, she says at 1034, where κατατέτηκ(α) expresses the corporal and spiritual consumption she is suffering. This heartfelt confession is immediately followed by Chremylus’ merciless: “No, you’re rotting away, if you ask me” (κατασέσηπας, 1035). As evidence of her physical ruin, the Old Woman then declares that she could be pulled through a ring (1036, διὰ δακτυλίου μὲν οὖν ἐμέ γ’ ἄν διελκύσαις) due to her current alleged emaciation, as the scholiasts note (Schol. vet. 1036, Schol. rec. 1036b; see also *Suda* τ 497 Adler, ἐπὶ τῶν πάνυ λεπτῶν). In this case, the spectators did not have long to wait for Chremylus’ ironic reply (1037): εἰ τυγχάνοι γ’ ὁ δακτύλιος ὦν τηλίας, “Sure, were it the ring of a *tēlia*”, if the Ravennas’ genitive τηλίας is retained. This is the reading accepted by Wilson (2007a) in his critical text, with no comment in the companion volume *Aristophanea* (Wilson 2007b). The Ravennas’ τηλίας was also favoured by Holzinger (1940, 285–286), who constructed the sentence as follows: ὁ δακτύλιος ὦν δακτύλιος τηλίας, giving the predicative δακτύλιος the sense of κύκλος or γύρος — a semantic nuance that is not attested, however, before late Greek literature. Sommerstein (2001, 121) translates “Yes, if the ring happened to be attached to a bread-seller’s tray”, subsequently offering (pp. 204–205) a peculiar defence of **R**’s text: the δακτύλιος of the τηλία is actually a ring (more plausibly made of leather than metal) attached to the tool and carried cross-body, allowing the vendor to have his or her hands free to comfortably sell the products displayed on the board. Henderson (2002, 571) translates: “Provided the ring were the size of a barrel hoop”.

Apart from **R**, the entire medieval paradosis (including *Suda* τ 497 Adler) transmits τηλία (nominative with a predicative function): “if the ring were a *tēlia*”, i.e. “if the ring had the diameter of a *tēlia*”, and this is the reading and interpretation I favour. As ancient commentators (Schol. vet. 1037k; cf. *Suda* τ 496 Adler) observed, the Old Woman’s fatness would have prevented her from being pulled through a ring, unless the ring had a hole of such a size to look like a perforated *tēlia* (1037i, λέγει ὅτι “εἰ μὴ ὁ δακτύλιος τοσοῦτον ἔχει τρύπημα, ὡς δοκεῖν εἶναι ἐν τηλίᾳ τὸ τρύπημα, **RVEΘNBarbAld** οὐκ ἄν διέλθοις” **VN**); it goes without saying that the scholiasts were aware that the aforementioned board was

<sup>16</sup> *Circulus cribi*, *cribi anulus*, or *incerniculum* are the most widespread interpretations in humanistic translations of *Plut.*: see Muttini 2023, 97, 132–133.

not perforated (1037h, τηλία μὲν ἐστὶν ἡ ἀτρύπητος σανὶς **RVEΘNBarbAld**). The actual difference between a small, common ring and a *tēlia* was their dimension, the rounded shape being merely an element shared by both. With the exception of Phot. τ 246 Theodoridis (≅ *Suda* τ 497 Adler ≅ *Etym. Gen. AB* s.v. τηλία, unde *Etym. Magn.* 756.56 Gaisford), which defines it as a πῆγμα τετράγωνον useful for selling flour or having cocks fight, and a commentary on Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (Anon. in *Arist. Art. Rhet. comm.* [p. 205, 14 Rabe], according to which “someone argues that *tēlia* is a square basket [καλαθίσκον τετράγωνον] where flour lies”), a *tēlia* is usually described by the sources as a board with a wide circular edge:

- Pollux (9.108), describing quail-fighting, informs us that players used a *tēlia* (similar to that used for selling bread) to trace a circle on the ground before having the birds fight each other: τηλία μὲν ὁμοίᾳ τῆ ἀρτοπώλιδι κύκλον ἐμπεριγράψαντες;
- *Anecdota Bachmann* (I 386, 30): σανίδιόν τι περιπεφραγμένον πανταχόθεν, “a tablet completely surrounded by a border”;
- *Anecdota Bekker* (275, 15): σανὶς ἀλφιτοπωλικὴ πλατεῖα, προσηλωμένας ἔχουσα κύκλω σανίδας, τοῦ μὴ τὰ ἄλφιτα ἐκπίπτειν, “a flat board used for selling flour, with other boards fixed in a circle to prevent the flour from falling out” (a similar description is provided by *Etym. Magn.* 757.7 Gaisford);
- *Anecdota Bekker* (307, 31) defines the *tēlia* on which cocks used to fight with each other as a πλέγμα τι ψιαθῶδες στρογγύλον.

Therefore, according to Chremylus, the Old Woman (who surely did not have a thin waist, despite her loud complaints about her physical state) could have been pulled through an anomalous, enormously large ring with the same diameter as a round *tēlia*. The circular shape both rings and *tēliai* shared must have triggered this association in Chremylus' mind, perhaps encouraged also by the fact that the Old Woman had just appeared on stage bearing a πίναξ, the wooden tray on which she placed the πλακοῦς and the other τραγήματα sent as gifts to her gigolo in order to receive erotic favours in return, but which he did not hesitate to send back to her with the addition of an ἄμης (cf. 995–999). This visual assessment of the scene may have prompted Chremylus to bring the *tēlia* into the conversation, as a tool the Old Woman must be familiar with, given her expertise in the loving preparation of bakery products. This is not to mention the fact that she herself was seemingly a glutton, as her size indicates.

Nor is this the first use of *tēliai* to mock women in Athenian comedy. The scholia on this line (Schol. vet. 1037b–c) inform us that Eupolis' *Maricas* (Lenaea 421 BCE) included an unidentified character who used an *eikasmos*, i.e. a burlesque comparison between a *tēlia* and the mother of the demagogue lamp-seller



Hyperbolus, whose bones ended up being thrown on a *tēlia* (Eup. fr. 209). Eupolis' joke likely insulted the demagogue's mother — the drunk old woman who danced the *kordax* in the same play (cf. Ar. *Nub.* 553–556, with Schol. vet. 555 Holwerda) — for her dishonourable work as a baker,<sup>17</sup> a profession she perhaps practiced also in Hermippus' *Artopōlides*.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of how attractive these assumptions appear, handling such meagre and often badly preserved fragmentary materials always requires caution, as conjectural reconstructions could be numerous, and all uncertain; it is no coincidence that, with regard to the comparison between Hyperbolus' mother and a *tēlia* in Eup. fr. 209, S. Douglas Olson proposes a number of different exegetical solutions, all of them ending with a question-mark: “Hyperbolus' mother was compared to a *tēlia* (because she was presented as a bread-woman, as perhaps a year or two later in Hermippus' *Artopōlides*?; or because she was tall and flat-chested or the like?)”;<sup>19</sup> τοῦτο τί ἐστὶν οὐκ οἶδα, indeed.

### 3 *Plut.* 1083: ἐτῶν

Line 1082 (οὐκ ἂν διαλεχθείην διεσπλεκωμένη) contains two verbs denoting sexual intercourse: for the former, see also Hyp. fr. 171 Jensen and *Plut. Sol.* 20.3; for the latter, cf. σπλεκοῦν in Ar. *Lys.* 152 (according to Schol. vet. Ar. *Plut.* 1082jα, σπλέκωμα represents the noise produced during copulation).<sup>20</sup> The Young Man thus categorically rejects the idea of having sex with an old woman “screwed by thirteen thousand years” (1082–1083):

οὐκ ἂν διαλεχθείην διεσπλεκωμένη  
ὑπὸ μυρίων ἐτῶν γε καὶ τρισχιλίων.

Willems (1919, III 357) did not succeed in making complete sense of l. 1083, and proposed emending the mss.' ἐτῶν γε to τε τῶνδε,<sup>21</sup> introducing a direct reference

**17** On this matter, particular interest is raised by Tzetzes' scholion on Ar. *Nub.* 555a Holwerda, γραῦν μεθύσιν, τὴν μητέρα δὴθεν Ὑπερβόλου, ἣν ἔλεγον ἀρτοπώλιδα εἶναι; but see also Schol. Tz. 552c, ὡς ἀρτοπώλισσαν.

**18** See Sonnino 1997; Sonnino 2012; Comentale 2017, 65–68.

**19** Olson 2016, 218.

**20** On both verbs, see Henderson 1991, 154–155.

**21** Rutherford 1896, 100 conjectured ὑπὸ χιλίων γε τῶνδε καὶ τρισμυρίων (τρισμαυρίων *iam* von Velsen 1881, 77 [apparatus] *coll.* Ar. *Eq.* 1156) in order to reconcile the quantitative evidence

to the spectators in the theatre: the Young Man would be declaring that he would never long for sex with a woman “fucked by *these* thirteen thousand”. The conjecture is plausible from a palaeographic perspective and finds some support in the fact that the theatrical audience is frequently addressed by the characters in Aristophanic comedies. But what granted this emendation a long life was, most of all, its acceptance in Victor Coulon’s critical edition, which was highly influential in the last century. The most striking consequence of Willems’ correction was to make *Plut.* 1083 a crucial, if not decisive, piece of evidence with regard to the long-standing question of the number of spectators the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens could hold in the fifth and early fourth centuries BCE, the time of the version of *Wealth* preserved in the manuscripts. For example, this passage inclined Luigi Gallo (1981, 295 n. 50) to believe that thirteen thousand spectators would be the number obtained by calculating one thousand people for each of the thirteen sectors (*kerkides*) into which the cavea was divided.<sup>22</sup>

Willems’ conjecture has now fallen into oblivion, and the *lectio codicum* has been restored by all recent editors (Torchio, Sommerstein, Henderson, Albin/Barberis, Wilson). Moreover, current estimates of the capacity of the fifth-century BCE theatre have significantly decreased, fluctuating between 4000 and 7000 spectators.<sup>23</sup> In addition, I believe that the genuineness of the manuscript reading (ἐτῶν) can be proved by what follows. Ancient scholia noticed that the term in question has a double semantic nuance: on the one hand, it mocks the Old Woman for her age (Schol. vet. 1083b, ὁ νέος τὸ “ἐτῶν” προσέθηκε, σκώπτων αὐτήν ὡς γραῦν),<sup>24</sup> but on the other, it tacitly implies ἀνδρῶν “men” (Schol. vet. 1083a, λείπει τὸ “ἀνδρῶν”; cf. Schol. rec. 1083b, ἐτῶν] πολιτῶν **thPstr** | ἐν μῆ λέξει νοεῖ δύο πράγματα, τοὺς πολίτας καὶ τοὺς χρόνους **Mt** | χρόνων, πολιτῶν

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related to the number of spectators with what he deemed was inferable from *Pl. Symp.* 175e, i.e. over 30.000.

**22** Halliwell (1998, 288) comments on his translation (“thirteen thousand”) of *Plut.* 1083: “the hyperbole, which happens to provide probably the most plausible classical estimate of the audience in the Theatre of Dionysus, implies that the woman is the most widely available of whores”.

**23** See Csapo 2007, 97; Loscalzo 2008, 69–71; Roselli 2014, 27.

**24** Modern scholars (see e.g. Elmore 1905, 436–437; Postgate 1905, 437–438) have often discussed the symbolic value of thirteen as an “indefinite number”, which could be the case for *Plut.* 1083 as well. Moreover, as Fraenkel 1950, III 759 (*ad Aesch. Ag.* 1605) pointed out, the number thirteen would embody the idea of “going beyond” or “exceeding” a round number (such as twelve: an up-to-date discussion on the Aeschylean passage is found in Medda 2017, III 424 *ad loc.*). Olson (1998, 258–259) is fairly cautious with regard both to the matter in question (broadly intended) and the specific interpretation of *Ar. Pax* 990: “Of all their examples, however, only *Plut.* 846; *Hom. Il.* 5.387; *Bacchyl.* 11.92; and perhaps *Plut.* 1083 and *Theoc.* 15.17 have any force, and none is decisive”.

V<sup>57</sup>).<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that ἔτων can be the genitive plural of both ἔτος (“year”) and ἔτης, a masculine noun of the first declension. In Homer, the latter is used to refer to kin or relatives (e.g. *Il.* 6.239; *Od.* 4.3), but in fifth-century poetry it begins to be restricted to the sense “citizen, fellow-citizen, private-citizen” (e.g. Pind. fr. 52f.10 M.; Aesch. *Supp.* 247; fr. 281a.28 R.; Eur. fr. 1014 Kann.; Thuc. 5.79.4 — where it is attested in the text, in Doric dialect, of a peace-treaty between Sparta and Argos).<sup>26</sup> The intended ambiguity of the term could thus sound perfectly acceptable to Aristophanes’ spectators (or at least to the smartest of them), in order to indicate the impressive amount not only of years but also of citizen-lovers possessed by the old whore: an elegant linguistic double entendre, comically combined with the extremely obscene διασπλεκοῦμαι.

In addition, one *topos* included in the *vetula-Skoptik* motif consisted in attributing a hyperbolic number of years to a now veteran hetaera. Paradigmatic evidence of this is provided by fr. 9 (*ap.* Ath. 13.587e) of the *Kynagis* of Philetærus (a fourth-century BCE comedian identified as “Aristophanes’ son” by *Suda* φ 308 Adler), which presents a series of slanders similar to those addressed to the Old Woman in *Wealth*:

Isn’t Cercope 3000 years (ἔτη τρισχίλια) old by now? And isn’t Diopeithes’ disgusting Telesis 10.000 years (ἔτερα μυρία) older than that? And no one has any idea when Theolyte was originally born. Didn’t Laïs ultimately die while being fucked? And haven’t Isthmias and Neaera and Phila rotted out? I won’t mention the Cossyphas, Galenes, and Coronas. And my lips are sealed about Naïs; because she’s lost her molars (transl. Olson 2010, 395).

With regard to this motif, it is also easy to imagine a scommatic continuity in Greek and Latin epigrammatic tradition, which is often populated by women mercilessly stigmatised as exaggeratedly old, and as dating back even to mythical past;<sup>27</sup> the comic poet Cratinus had already mocked an old woman by defining her as “born before Tethys” (πρότηθυσ, fr. 483, *ap.* Phryn. *Praep. Soph.* p. 102.19 De Borries). A representative, exhilarating sample of passages follows:

<sup>25</sup> Inclined to accept the latter interpretation are some humanistic Latin-language translators of *Plut.*: friar Alexander of Otranto (1458), *strupizatam a mille civibus tribus milibus*; and Ludovicus of Poppi (late 15th century), *nequaquam colloquerer te subagitata / decem milibus civium et ter mille*; see Muttini 2023, 111.

<sup>26</sup> See Radt 1958, 113–114; Rutherford 2001, 308 n. 8; Sommerstein 2019, 161 (*ad* Aesch. *Supp.* 247).

<sup>27</sup> On this *topos*, see Goldberg 1992, 104 ff., 286 ff. (*ad Carm. Priapea* 12 and 57); Schatzmann 2012, 166–167 (*ad* Nicarch. *Anth. Pal.* 11.71); Floridi 2014, 123, 550 (*ad* Lucill. *Anth. Pal.* 11.69 and 11.408).

“The letter υ signifies four hundred, but your years are twice as much, my tender Lais, as old as a crow and Hecuba put together, grandmother of Sisypus and sister of Deucalion. But dye your white hair and say ‘tata’ to everyone” (Myrinus, *Anth. Pal.* 11.67; transl. Paton 1918, 105).

“Themistoneoe, three times a crow’s age, when she dyes her grey hair becomes suddenly not young (véα) but Rhea” (Lucillius, *Anth. Pal.* 11.69; transl. Paton 1918, 105).

“Niconoe was once in her prime, I admit that, but her prime was when Deucalion looked on the vast waters. Of those times we have no knowledge, but of her now we know that she should seek not a husband, but a tomb” (Nicarchus, *Anth. Pal.* 11.71; transl. Paton 1918, 107).

“They say you spend a long time in the bath, Heliodora, an old woman of a hundred (ἐτῶν ἑκατόν) not yet retired from the profession. But I know why you do it. You hope to grow young, like old Pelias, by being boiled” (Lucillius, *Anth. Pal.* 11.256; transl. Paton 1918, 193).

“You dye your hair, but you will never dye your old age, or smooth out the wrinkles of your cheeks. Then don’t plaster all your face with white lead, so that you have not a face, but a mask; for it serves no purpose. Why are you out of your wits? Rouge and paste will never turn Hecuba into Helen” (Lucillius [or Lucianus], *Anth. Pal.* 11.408; transl. Paton 1918, 267).

“I can’t do an old woman. You complain, Matrinia? Well, I *can*, even an old woman. But you are not old, you’re dead. I can do Hecuba, I can do Niobe, Matrinia, but only if the one is not yet a bitch, the other not yet a stone” (Martial 3.32; transl. Shackleton Bailey 1993, I 223).

“You have three hundred consuls, Vetustilla, and three hairs and four teeth” (Martial 3.93.1–2; transl. Shackleton Bailey 1993, I 269).

“When you swear, Lesbia, that you were born in Brutus’ consulship, you lie. Were you born, Lesbia, in Numa’s reign? You lie even so. For, as they recount your centuries, you are said to have been moulded from Prometheus’ clay” (Martial 10.39; transl. Shackleton Bailey 1993, II 363).

“Daughter of Pyrrha, stepdaughter of Nestor, she was grey when Niobe saw her as a girl, old Laertes called her grandmother, Priam nurse, Thyestes mother-in-law: Plutia, having outlived all crows, was laid at last in this tomb and itches with lust alongside bald Melanthio” (Martial 10.67; transl. Shackleton Bailey 1993, II 385–387).

“Why do you pluck your aged cunt, Ligeia? Why stir up the ashes in your tomb? Such elegances befit girls; but you cannot even be reckoned an old woman any more. Believe me, Ligeia, that is a pretty thing for Hector’s wife to do, not his mother. You are mistaken if you think this a cunt when it no longer has anything to do with a cock. So, Ligeia, for very shame don’t pluck the beard of a dead lion” (Martial 10.90, transl. Shackleton Bailey 1993, II 407).

“A hag as old as Hecuba, who could have been the Cumaean Sibyl’s sister, or that old crone seen by Theseus homeward-bent, laid out on funeral mound, comes here; and that a fuck for her by me be found, with wrinkled hands raised up, implores the skies, and spits out one of only three teeth as she cries” (*Priapea* 12.1–9; transl. Parker 1988, 87).

“An old, decayed and corpse-like rotten crow, who might have been a wet-nurse long ago to such as Tithon, Priam and Nestor, if not an aged woman e’en before their time, asks me that she may never lack a man — what if she asks her girlhood back? I’ll tell her not to fret, nor be dismayed: if she can pay, they’ll treat her as a maid” (*Priapea* 57; transl. Parker 1988, 157).

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